

Mark 1:1–8

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 25 November 2011

After our diversion on the First Sunday of Advent with the Palm Sunday text, we're back for the Second Sunday of Advent with more traditional fare. We have Isaiah singing his magnificent verses, which most of us know by heart from Handel's *Messiah*. We have Peter admonishing us that we ought to hope. And we have this wonderful eight-verse section from the Gospel of Mark introducing John the Baptist out in the wilderness, along with some splendid song. So we've got meat and potatoes.

I'm willing to suspect that the reason for the diversion, the Palm Sunday parade on Advent 1, has something to do with the theology of glory. There we have, at least according to the tradition, a great parade, though by the text it looks more like street theater: a magnificent parade winding up right at the doors of the temple, with Jesus knocking on the door, ready to enter Holy Week. The trouble with reading it that way, of course, is that Jesus goes so strangely limp. Through the first ten chapters of Mark's Gospel he has been striding like a colossus, going here, going there, doing this, doing that, practically hyperactive, spilling over with every good thing. And now he walks. As he comes to Jerusalem, the scene shifts. He is actually tired at the end of the day and goes out for a snooze. There is no dramatic confrontation, only this quietness, and that prepares us for what is to come.

Today we have Mark 1, where we're out in the boonies, far out in the wilderness, far away from anything, in the silence with John the Baptist, a solitary voice, preparing us for what is to come: not for Black Friday and the traditional spendthrift holidays, but for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the entry of Christ Jesus into our history. So we'll work our way through these texts. They're a lot of fun.

Isaiah 40: Comfort, O Comfort My People

We'll start with Isaiah, this magnificent word pouring out of him. This time Isaiah is not speaking to God, as last time, nor, at least at the beginning of the text, is he speaking in God's name. God is speaking to Isaiah, and we can hear him. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says

your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

So we turn to the wilderness, and to God's promise to forgive Israel's iniquity and bring the nation home to Jerusalem. Here is a superhighway on its way, and the *kabod* of Yahweh, as John Victor Halvorson used to say so magnificently: God's glory is going to come across the desert, making the rough places plain, smoothing out his way as it goes, and opening the way for the people of Israel and Judah held in bondage to come back and be restored to their nation.

In contrast to this magnificent project, the human enterprise is put in its true proportion: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." And that word stands. When I hear this text now, I'm reminded of a wonderful man I met in Ethiopia last winter with his wife, great, great people. He's a road builder, and he builds roads all over East Africa. Every time he goes out to build a road, he brings a preacher along, and they build a chapel, and the preacher starts a congregation. So as the road is opened, the Word opens its own road. And as the Word opens its own road, people come across it to join the congregation and become God's people.

This is God's Word. It makes the rough places plain, and it opens up the new age in which everything is restored. Having dealt with them hard-handedly, having punished, having dealt left-handedly, in Luther's image, God now promises to deal with Israel with his right hand, to feed his flock like a shepherd.

Psalm 85: Past as Prologue

If we start there, we can move to Psalm 85, which comes pretty much in direct parallel. Here are two passages that reinforce one another, Isaiah 40:1-11 and Psalm 85. "Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger."

The psalmist remembers a previous instance in which God punished Israel. Clearly he is living in a time he sees as punishment, when God has once more had to set himself against his people. And that brings to mind previous times when God relented of his anger and turned to them in grace. So, remembering that time with joy and thankful for it, the psalmist goes back to it in hope, using past as prologue, seeing the past as prologue to the future and thus as hope

that God will do it again. On the basis of that expectation he can say, “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.”

There is this promise: as God punishes, he restores; as God strikes down, he raises up. So with Isaiah and the psalmist we cling to the preached God, the God who makes promises and keeps them in the face of experience that has the quality of penalty. Advent begins with these two passages, giving us a good dose of hope in the face of all we’ve gone through.

2 Peter: Even the Rocks Cry Out

Now we come to 2 Peter. I have to say this. After preaching on these texts for forty years, working them over and over again, I have come to believe very strongly in the inspiration of Scripture. The Word gets through one way or the other. And I suppose 2 Peter would be about as challenging a test as any. He’s a hard person to like. He’s probably also the author of Jude, or at least a friend of Jude’s; they share a common theological vocabulary. They’re both way too blameless. If you find yourself reading 2 Peter and Jude repeatedly, I think you should call me, because that would be like spending a lifetime on the book of Leviticus, though I have a friend who has done that and gained magnificently from it.

So we have to say this: in 2 Peter the hope of the gospel, the overwhelming, driving hope that animated Saint Paul and the authors of the Gospels, the hope so central to the main line of Scripture, has cooled by the time of 2 Peter and Jude to the point where it has become something you should believe in because others do. It has lost its appeal. You hope because I’m hoping, and don’t you disappoint me. So right away we start on the defensive.

“But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” You know from the warm-up where it’s going to go. “The Lord is not slow.” Are you kidding me? Nearly two thousand years: I don’t consider that eschatological speed, do you? I used to talk with Gustaf Wingren, my old teacher, about this, and he would always say the kingdom hasn’t come yet because there hasn’t been enough time for preaching. That’s very much like this passage, by the way. I saw old Dr. Wingren when I was reading this.

And yet you see how the gospel can percolate up through it. We have that famous, very troublesome passage: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief.” Well, at least it’s not the Lord coming like a thief; we can give some thanks for that. It will sneak up on you. It’ll catch you like a burglar: just when you leave some cash in your house, somehow a burglar knows it

and shows up to help himself. And because you should hope, you should clean up your life and live more decently. Now, some of us give evidence of needing this message, and of course we hate it like poison. The last thing I need is some Baptist working on my sanctification. That starts me singing, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus,” and speed it up a little, because I’m tired of being chewed on by moralists.

But still, there is something good here. Listen to this: “But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” Now there it is. Even the rocks cry out. Even 2 Peter, evidence of early catholicism in the New Testament if you ever saw it: once he gets through all his moralistic monkey business, even old 2 Peter can get down to brass tacks. “In accordance with his promise, we wait for” what? “New heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” What a beautiful image.

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.” Well, not bad; we can work at that. Though I expect some of us are still so spotty and blemished that there’s no hope. When we get done with the sauna, I always say, “Well, my skin is clean, but my heart is as black as ever.” That’s pretty much the case. We’re sinners in Christ’s grip, and anyone who claimed the illusion of spotlessness might lead people to suspect there’s something in his pipe that isn’t tobacco. Anyway, that’s 2 Peter, and if you’ve got an appetite for this stuff, more power to you.

Mark 1: The Beginning of the Gospel, in the Wilderness

Now we go to this Gospel, which is dearly beloved and all kinds of fun: Mark 1:1–8. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah.” Here we get the voice and the word. And where are they? Not on Main Street, pirouetting, with a group of Shriners following behind on motorcycles throwing candy to the kids. The promise enters in the wilderness. Just as Isaiah heard the word in the wilderness, so “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness.”

Just think of the incredible contrast in these words. The beginning of the gospel of God, and John the baptizer appeared where? In the wilderness. Are you kidding? Is this the beginning of the gospel of God? If you can see it, you’ve got better eyes than I do, because we know John the Baptist. We have a good sample of his preaching. He and 2 Peter and Jude could have a little conference on the common school, I’m afraid. And we know what’s going to happen to him. The beginning of the gospel of God is going to wind up in prison, and he’s going to lose his

head to a lewd striptease dancer, not yet aware of the power of her body, out there on the banquet table shimmying and shaking and sending old Herod into a sweat of lust. This is the beginning of the gospel of God: John the baptizer, who appeared in the wilderness and never seems to leave it. It breaks out wherever he goes.

He's way out there in the bush preaching. And can you imagine it? People go out to hear him, great crowds of them. They go out there to hear this message, even though "the axe is lying at the root of the trees." "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Go away! And what does that go to show you? When the Word breaks out, it finds ears. So people go all the way out there to hear him. And when he manages to extricate himself from one wilderness, he simply finds another. John the Baptist is a little like that character in the old *Lil Abner* cartoon, Joe Btfsplk, who always walked around with a thundercloud over his head and lightning jumping out of it. Wherever John the Baptist goes, the wilderness breaks out.

So we can speak of several kinds of wilderness. There is geographic wilderness. Here in western Oregon there is wilderness that is practically impenetrable. With all the rain we get, the soil has been leached for generations, but it's still fertile enough to grow fir trees two hundred and fifty feet tall and higher, and you can guess what happens when all that fertility gets loose and starts expressing itself in brambles. You can hardly move in places. That's a wilderness.

But there's a political wilderness around John the Baptist too. He's tangled up with Herod's court. He's been making comments about Herod's wife. You have to give him this: he hasn't learned any tact. Imagine John the Baptist going to a regional consultation in the ELCA with a bunch of bishops. That would be too much fun. The wilderness would break out right there. "What do you preach? 'Even now the axe is lying at the root'? You must be joking. You didn't actually say that in church? They won't even take you in North Dakota, for crying out loud." That's a wilderness. He is a wilderness man.

And we know our own wild edges, of course. Where does the Word break out? In the wilderness: geographical, political, economic, social, personal. There's one wilderness after another, and in the midst of the wilderness, what happens? There's a word. There's a word that is spoken. "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He came preaching a baptism that works like this: you

get detached from everything that is destructive, so that you can be attached, in the forgiveness of sins, to the one who raises the dead and breaks open the future.

A Baptism of Repentance

And who is that? Well, now we get more of a description of this wild preacher. It's not him, and he knows it. "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." They obviously haven't been to a recent worship seminar and learned that forgiveness of sins is a downer and doesn't attract seekers. You'd have to say these people are seekers, good night. They've left Jerusalem and all the comforts of home and gone into the wilderness looking for John the Baptist, of all people. And when they get there, what does he do? He makes them confess. He makes them confess because he knows something better than the cheap absolutions of the marketplace. He knows something better than product relationships. He knows something better than fulfilling yourself between the knees of whoever happens to be available. He knows something better than relationships with pornography and chat rooms. He knows every wilderness there ever was, and in the midst of that wilderness he's got work to do. The word detaches us from all the insignificance and attaches us, so that we are caught up in Christ Jesus.

"Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." Only a prophet would eat a diet like that. Not even Weight Watchers, not all the bulimics and anorexics in the world, could sell you on a diet like that. But he's eating it, and he's preaching: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." Well, he wouldn't get much of an argument there, not with the haberdashery he's acquired, not with his dietary habits, and certainly not with his choice of habitat. He is the man of the bush: set for the bush, produced by the bush, driven by the bush, and only at home in the bush. And so he has only this to work with: just a word.

"I have baptized you with water." I've given you a wash job. I've cleaned you up. I've cleansed you morally. I've taken on the powers that have bound you. But what is he going to do? "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Baptized with the Holy Spirit

Now this, of course, is not the baptism of the Holy Spirit sold and generated on television, where your tongue rattles in your head and you start performing minor miracles. This is an entirely different baptism, in which your life is set on a new foundation. The old foundation is Adam and Eve's. The old foundation is self-consciousness. The old foundation is becoming your own best friend, acquiring yourself by disciplines, by taking on whatever would hinder you.

This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and what does he do? He calls, he gathers, he enlightens, he sanctifies, and he keeps. He takes you out of your own hands and places you in his. That's a fitting description of repentance and faith. We are taken out of our own hands, with our parades and projects and acquisitions and self-realizations. We are taken out of our own hands, rescued from our own clutches, from our regrets and resentments and visions of retaliation and revenge, so that we can be placed in his hand. Not so that we can be, but because we have been taken hold of by the Holy Spirit, who does not work on us from the outside, like Jude saying "You ought to be like this," or even like Isaiah at this point, but works on us by taking hold of us from the heart, with that word sung by old Isaiah, sung by the psalmist, sung here even by 2 Peter of all people. If he can, you can; and if you can, my goodness, just think what can happen. Holy smokes, everything is going to break loose. Even the stones cry out. Lots of fun.

So "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," and in fact he has baptized you with the Holy Spirit. He has come to work repentance. He has worked repentance and faith in you, so that your life will not simply descend into your own abyss. Hell is an eternal conversation with yourself, solitary confinement in the fullest sense. But he will descend into the abyss too, with a word that breaks it open, breathes, and makes you alive.

Now the fun starts. All of this comes, of course, under the cross, and we see the contrariness, the adversity. John the Baptist is in the wilderness, and when he comes out of one wilderness he winds up in another. It's the same old story. But the Word prevails, and it prevails in such a way that it is fit for your lips: to stand up and say, "You have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, and this promise has been kept."

I'm sorry to have to do this on tape. We're heading for Minnesota on Sunday, and while you're at the normal meeting time on Tuesday we'll be on the road. We'll be in touch then. God's

peace to you.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 25 November 2011 (about 29 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDnxpteddvY>

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